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Chief Justice
Wisconsin Supreme Court

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50-30-10 Celebration

My friends, I thanked Governor Lucey 30 years ago when he appointed me, and I repeat my thanks to him today. I am glad neither one of us has had second thoughts about our respective decisions.

This is a great celebration, coming as it does midway through my career.

Thanks also to our hosts—the Deans of the State’s two outstanding law schools, and Steve Levine and George Brown representing the State Bar. I am proud to say that I have taught at both law schools, and I am proud to be one of the 20,000 members of the State Bar. I am especially pleased that a cow has come, in light of my scholarly endeavors in the dairy industry. If you haven’t seen the cows on the concourse, please do so. Thanks also to my long-time friend and colleague Judge Barbara Crabb and to the many people who organized this event. Thank you to all of you who have come to your capitol for this terrific party. And thanks to my husband of 53 years, Seymour Abrahamson—as usual, he does not have a speaking part at judicial functions.

Many people have sent flowers and I appreciate them all, but one arrangement came from Lavinia Goodell and her two sidekicks. Lavinia Goodell was the first woman to be eligible practice law in the State of Wisconsin Supreme Court and I can only guess that her two sidekicks were the second and third women on the court, my good friends Ann Walsh Bradley and Janine Geske.

A 50-30-10 celebration is the occasion to look both back and to the future. Looking back at my law practice, I think of my former senior law partners—the late Gordon Sinykin and the late U.S. District Court Judge James E. Doyle Sr. (the governor’s father)—and the Doyle and Sinykin families. These two great lawyers took a chance on me and opened wide doors of opportunity for me. My partners gave me valuable lessons about practicing law. It was with great sadness that this year I lost two good friends, Dorothy Sinykin and Ruth Bachhuber Doyle.

Looking back at the court years, I have served with 19 justices. I have learned something from each of them—whether we agreed on cases or not. I learned from my colleagues the importance of keeping an open mind, of listening hard and of making the tough decisions after adequate reflection but with promptness. I learned from Bruce Beilfuss the importance of having a fair, even-handed chief justice presiding over the court. I learned from Bob Hansen about dysfunctional families and their needs and those needs of children, the most vulnerable persons in our society. I learned from Janine Geske to pay attention to the human beings in the case, not merely to process cases by case number. I learned how to win the friendship of Roland Day by finding the cap to his favorite pen. I learned more about hunting and farming from Jon Wilcox than I ever thought I would know.

Jon Wilcox is the second senior justice on the court in terms of service. As you know, the chief justice position is held by the most senior justice. We call Jon Wilcox “Chief Justice in Waiting.” Jon has gotten tired of waiting. Come on, stand up Jon. He is planning to retire at the end of this session and the Court will miss him. Let me take this opportunity to introduce my other colleagues, who have been very kind to come to the Rotarian speech earlier today: Ann Walsh Bradley, Pat Crooks, David Prosser, and our newest judge, Louis Butler.

I have learned from all my colleagues on the trial courts, on the tribal courts, and on the federal courts, the importance of undertaking and supporting innovative programs to improve our resolution of disputes. There have been two recurring themes in this court’s approach to assuring access to justice: partnerships and cooperation.

These themes are evident in the Court’s relationship with the legislative and executive branches of the federal, state and local governments, as we strive to work with all government units to improve the administration of justice. The themes are also evident within the judicial branch, where the Supreme Court and its administrative offices work closely with the trial courts, the tribal courts and the federal courts. This cooperative, partnership approach has accomplished much.

I learned from the late William H. Rehnquist, Chief Justice of the United States, who was on this platform 10 years ago to administer the chief justice’s oath to me, that the chief justice must play an important role as a leader in improving the administration of justice and the chief justice must be a spokesperson for the courts and the people we serve. He remains one of my role models.

I have stood for election three times. In each election I have learned important lessons from my opponents, from the public whose support I have sought, from the one-way streets in Waukesha and the mall in the middle of downtown Stevens Point. Driving the state, especially in the winter, is not easy.

My message both on and off the campaign trail has always been that judges are to decide cases fairly, impartially and according to the facts and the law, not according to whim, personal ideology, prejudice, fear, the dictates of other branches of government or the latest public opinion poll. I, like Governor Lucey, have learned that the people of this state value a fair, impartial, non-partisan judiciary because such a judiciary ensures the integrity of the judicial process for all persons and ensures that the rule of law applies to each individual, to each business and to the government itself.

I have learned that being a neutral, fair and impartial judge does not mean sitting in this marble edifice in judicial isolation. I have learned that judges and lawyers must be out and about, communicating about our work with our many publics. The judicial branch relies upon the trust and confidence of the people, and we’ll not retain that trust and confidence without the public understanding the role of the judicial system.

I have learned much.

Looking forward— I plan to learn every day something new from my colleagues in this state and our sister states, from lawyers and litigants, from the law schools, from the people of the state, and all of you—especially the Capitol Police and the maintenance people in this building: they know how to do a great job.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court and I remain committed to fulfilling the Court’s responsibilities under the Wisconsin Constitution to provide an efficient, effective and fair system for resolving disputes. In some states the courts are under siege, as personal

attacks are made on judges on the basis of their decisions. We've not reached that point in Wisconsin, and with your continued support we will never reach it. I hope you all will join us in supporting your judicial branch of government as it moves forward.

This has been a great celebration. I've enjoyed seeing you all. I will long cherish and remember this day. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.